

# EMBODIED BOARDERS: SNOWBOARDING, STATUS AND STYLE <sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** *The body is a symbol of status, a system of social markings and a site of distinctions. Drawing on documentary and visual sources, combined with participant observations, this article explores the body as a signifier through an examination of numerous cultural practices used by snowboarders to distinguish themselves from non-snowboarders and each other. In examining embodied snowboarders I firstly analyse their cultural tastes and styles of dress, language and bodily deportment. Secondly, I consider how boarders earn symbolic capital through demonstrations of commitment, physical prowess and risk taking. This analysis implicitly views the body as a social phenomenon, that is, it conceptualises the body as a possessor of power, a form of status, a bearer of symbolic value and a form of physical capital. The body now plays a central role in producing and reproducing social groups and the “embodied boarder” is an important case study for understanding how contemporary youth both construct and make sense of their worlds.*

## INTRODUCTION

Snowboarding is not so cool that riders should act like the educated do among the ignorant, the rich among the poor. It's not so tough that people need to represent it like hoods on a corner, disrespecting anyone on the mountain outside their little crew. Once united we seem today divided, excluding and ignoring those not hip to what's the new hype this season. It almost pains some snowboarders to acknowledge others on the chair next to them; they stare forward, through their goggles up the hill, consciously silent. They clown style, equipment, and ability (Blumberg, 2002, p. 16).

Social status involves practices which emphasise and exhibit cultural distinctions and differences which are a crucial feature of all social stratification...Status may be conceptualised therefore as lifestyle; that is as the totality of cultural practices such as dress, speech, outlook and bodily dispositions...While status is about political entitlement and legal location within civil society, status also involves, and to a certain extent is, style (Turner, 1988, p. 66).

The body is a symbol of status, a system of social marking and a site of distinctions. In contemporary society, the symbolic values attached to bodily forms are critical to many people's sense of self. Drawing on documentary and visual sources, combined with participant observation, this article explores the body as signifier through an examination of numerous cultural practices used by snowboarders to distinguish themselves from non-snowboarders and each other.<sup>2</sup> Snowboarding offers a good case study of contemporary embodiment. The activity has seen a 240 per cent increase in participation over the past decade (Fox sports,

2004). Like those in many other former and existing youth cultures, snowboarders dress, speak and behave in distinctive ways. Yet, these creative practices continue to confuse many cultural outsiders. By analysing the embodied practices of snowboarders, I provide some insights into how contemporary youth both construct and make sense of their worlds.

Initially, devotees identified themselves through their practices which they contrasted to those engaged in by skiers. Today, however, snowboarders define themselves in opposition to broader society, and the activity comprises a range of sub-group practices – back country boarders, half-pipe jocks, terrain park jibbers, etc. – who rely heavily on embodied markers to distinguish themselves. In examining embodied snowboarders I firstly analyse their cultural tastes and styles of dress, language and bodily deportment. Secondly, I consider how boarders earn symbolic capital through demonstrations of commitment, physical prowess and risk taking.

The distinctive tastes and styles in the snowboarding culture conceal differences in power. The embodied practices of snowboarders act as mechanisms that control access to the culture by selecting and rejecting new members according to overt and covert criteria. This analysis implicitly views the body as a social phenomenon; that is, it conceptualises the body as a possessor of power, a form of status, a bearer of symbolic value and a form of physical capital.

### **The Body**

On almost any crowded urban street one will see pierced, tattooed, dieted, tanned, jewelled, trained or perhaps surgically or medically enhanced bodies. Bernard Rudofsky (1986) reminds us that many of these practices are not new; in fact different cultural (e.g., Egyptian<sup>3</sup>) or tribal groups (e.g., Maori<sup>4</sup>) have long inscribed their identities on the bodies of their members. However, in contrast to pre-modern societies, where traditional signs marked the body in ritualised settings, today people treat the body as a phenomenon to be shaped, decorated and trained as an expression of both individual and group identity (Shilling, 1993). French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu provides insights into our sociological understandings of these embodied practices which he associates with the concepts of status, lifestyle, distinction, habitus, dispositions and cultural capital.<sup>5</sup> Capital refers to the different forms of power held by social agents. Bourdieu (1986) identifies various forms of capital, including economic, social and symbolic, as well as cultural. These forms of power are structuring principles of the social space and determine the position of social agents in the social hierarchy (Laberge, 1995). Of specific interest to this analysis is the concept of *cultural capital* which Bourdieu argues exists in three irreducible forms: in the objectified state, the institutionalised state and the embodied state.<sup>6</sup> Clarifying the latter, Bourdieu notes that “most of the properties of cultural capital can be deduced from the fact that, in its fundamental state, it is linked to the body and presupposes embodiment” (1986, p. 244). Bourdieu (1978) also refers to this embodied form of cultural capital as physical capital which he treats as a form of capital in its own right. Shilling views this as the more useful conceptualisation of the physical as it “allows one to examine the forms of embodiment that create the basis of all other varieties of capital” (1993, p. 149), and it is the one I employ in this article.

The distribution of cultural capital is produced and sustained through practices of classes. Kay and Laberge (2002) explain that, within Bourdieu’s sociological theory, classes do not refer to economic strata but, rather, refer to

groups of social agents who share the same social conditions of existence, interests, social experience and value system, and who tend to define themselves in relation to other groups of agents. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is important here. Habitus refers to a set of acquired schemes of dispositions, perceptions and appreciation that orients our practices and gives meaning to them. Sport sociologist Suzanne Laberge explains it as both "the embodiment of the set of material and objective determinations" and "the structure of social relations that generate and give significance to individual likes (or taste) and dislikes with regard to practice and action" (1995, p. 136). Bourdieu's concept of habitus enhances understanding of the ways in which embodied practices construct identity, difference and given social orders (Kay and Laberge, 2002).

Insights into the body, as a possessor of power, are also facilitated by Bourdieu's notion of *field*. Bourdieu (1977) refers to the "sport field" as a site that defines sport with respect to the allocation of rewards, systems of rules and the social identity of participants. The field of sporting practices is the site of struggles in which what is at stake is the "monopolistic capacity to impose the legitimate definition of sporting practice and of the legitimate function of sporting activity" (Bourdieu, 1978, p. 826). This article utilizes Bourdieu's theoretical conceptualisations to help explain the increasingly significant role of the body for identity formation within contemporary culture.

In early capitalism, socio-economic class was the main source of identity with the major social groups overwhelmingly, even exclusively, defined in terms of their position in an economically based hierarchy (see Turner, 1988). However, with the development of mass communication in late capitalism, styles and culture based on education, language and training – which had been evident in the feudal era and used to maintain social closure – become mixed into a "pot pourri or medley of tastes and cultural practice" (Turner, 1988, p. 76). Bryan Turner perceives the "conventional hierarchies within the cultural system" as "more fragmented and diversified than in any previous period" and explains this as the result of an "explosion of cultural signs and cacophony of lifestyles" (1988, pp. 77-78). Similarly, Bourdieu saw the expansion of "the new cultural intermediaries", as he calls them,<sup>7</sup> widening the range of legitimate cultural goods and breaking down some of the old symbolic hierarchies (cited in Featherstone, 1991, p. 35).

The importance of consumption, and specifically leisure, as a source and expression of identity is not a new concept. Veblen (1970), writing in the late nineteenth century about the aristocracy, proposed that social classes use commodities as markers of social position and cultural style. In contemporary Western consumer culture the significance of material objects for identity creation has quantitatively and qualitatively changed (Wheaton, 2000; see also Warde, 1994). In contemporary society consumption has become a major form of identity construction and, within this context, the body, a site of cultural capital, is increasingly central. Consumption is closely linked to lifestyles and self-identity (see Featherstone, 1991; Giddens, 1991). Taste, or the practical aspect of lifestyle, expresses the location of an individual or group within the social system. According to Richard Flacks, "self-worth and worth in the eyes of others" is as much organised around "one's style of life and one's consumption patterns...as one's occupational status" (1971, p. 22).

In many youth subcultures, "style [is] the message and the means of expression" (Fox, 1987, p. 345). Style becomes a means of distinguishing group membership, differentiating the poseurs from the professionals (Donnelly & Young, 1988; Fox, 1987; Lowney, 1995). Furthermore, this concern with style and fashion in creating

and performing cultural identities in late modernity, particularly among youth groups and the new urban middle classes, is more widespread. As Craik (1994) argues, "fashion became a tool of prestigious imitation among most social groups, the specific character of which was flavoured by techniques of gender, fashion and consumer knowledge, competencies and habits; and by the circumstances of different lifestyles" (cited in Wheaton, 2000, p. 266).

The boundaries between groups, and the disparities in their ranks, are partly reaffirmed by lifestyles. Ohl (2000) identifies sport as a lifestyle which has particular visibility in part because it is conspicuously embodied. He also claims that the choices and judgements associated with such lifestyles are closely linked to the use of an embodied social symbolic system to produce distinctions. The adoption of sub-cultural identities, whether through the visual signs of dress, or by the less visible commitments to specialist activities and interests, is a way of "asserting cultural identity and a sense of community" (Beezar, 1992, p. 114). It can be argued that these status groups, characterised by different lifestyles, tastes and embodied practices, are nothing but classes whose source of power is misperceived. Yet, it is not sufficient to simply illustrate the existence of these different styles of life, it must also be demonstrated that such differences conceal differences in power. The practices of dress, lingo, bodily deportment and other less visible commitments are linked to definite systems of dispositions, contribute to status differences and, thus, have social and political significance in these groups. These ideas are taken up in the following sections which examine the embodiment of cultural identity in snowboarding.

#### **SNOWBOARDING STEEZ: CLOTHING, LANGUAGE AND BODILY DEPORTMENT**

Snowboarding, which emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s in North America, initially developed in opposition to skiing (Heino, 2000; Howe, 1998; Humphreys, 1996). Skiing was an expensive and bourgeois sport framed by a strong set of rules of conduct with participants being mostly white, middle and upper class. The pioneers of snowboarding were predominantly young, white, middle-class males who one insider labelled "sort of sporto, pot-smoking skiers" (Howe, 1998, p. 24). Even though many snowboarders downplay the financial resources required to participate, economic capital is a prerequisite.<sup>8</sup> Early in snowboarding history, all you needed was "a couple of hundred bucks" to become – "an instant snowboarder" (Ben, quoted in Anderson, 1999, p. 68). In contemporary snowboard culture that amount has magnified ten-fold.<sup>9</sup> Although both skiing and snowboarding require financial resources, the essence of the opposition between them lay in culture and lifestyle (Humphreys, 1996, 1997, 2003). For example, while "skiing embodied technical discipline and control, snowboarding embodied freedom, hedonism and irresponsibility" (Humphreys, 1996, p. 9). Such differences reinforce Bourdieu's concept of embodied practice as a key determinant in the distinctions between social groups. In Bourdieu's words: "Different sports have different images and such images might be perpetuated long after a relative change in their accessibility in purely material terms...there is more to social exclusivity than economic cost" (cited in Kew, 1986, p. 311). Mike Featherstone notes that "newcomers adopt subversive strategies, they seek difference, discontinuity and revolution... strategies to create space for themselves and displace the established" (1991, p. 92). Snowboarders embodied several distinctive practices, including clothing, language and bodily deportment to

ensure their image, or rather identity, diverged from skiers. The friction between skiers and snowboarders has diminished, yet the image of the youthful, hedonistic and 'alternative' snowboarder remains important for the identity of the participants and the activity *per se* (Burton, 2003).

The concepts of taste and style help explain how the social division between skiing and snowboarding became embodied. And it is through the expression of taste that snowboarders maintain similarities or differences between themselves. Bourdieu explains that taste:

...unites and separates...it unites all those who are the product of similar conditions while distinguishing them from others. And it distinguishes in an essential way, since taste is the basis of all that one has –people and things – and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others. (1984, p. 56)

In short, taste is one of the key signifiers and elements of social identity (Jenkins, 2002). Turner (1988) also identifies taste, the practical dimension of lifestyle, as a primary means of separating groups. He sees social groups distinguishing themselves from their competitors by their superior bodily gestures, speech and deportment. Taste not only plays an important role in identifying social groups, it also functions to accommodate and reinforce the existing structure of social inequality (Wilson, 2002).

The key point here is that taste and style – which are embodied – have social and cultural value; they are important components of physical capital. Snowboarders exhibit 'steerz' through their appearance, social interaction and snowboarding technique. Style is currently a buzzword in the snowboarding media. For example, fans write to their favourite professionals praising their styles (Question authority, 2003; Ask doctor Marco, 2003). Snowboarders have embodied their differences from 'others' through taste and style choices and, specific to this section, the symbolic practices of clothing, language and bodily deportment.

### **Dressing for Distinction**

Bryan Turner argues that "dress symbolises and states one's wealth and political power by indicating one's superior sense of taste and distinction" (1988, p. 68). Similarly, Barnes and Eicher (1992) note that "dress serves as a sign that the individual belongs to a certain group, but simultaneously differentiates the same individual from all others: it includes and excludes" (p. 1). Clothing constitutes an important symbolic marker of membership in the snowboarding culture. Snowboard clothing has gone from "garish to grunge to gorgeous, from incredibly impractical to highly technical, from something for the outlandish few to the standard for the majority of snow sliders" (Snow Sports Industries, 2003-2004). With the growing conflict between skiers and snowboarders during the early to mid 1990s, many adopted clothing styles to distinguish themselves from skiers. An insider recalls the period:

...in 1990-91, everything [in snowboarding] was purple and teal. It was awful. Then some trust fund kids got into the mix with more money. You had kids...wearing anything that showed how different they were from sporto skiers: giant cut off jeans covered in ice, a huge chain wallet, big hooded sweatshirts, backwards baseball caps, and windbreakers...

We called it Big Jean Fantasy. The new school was rebelling, super-rebelling against the ski industry, even rebelling against the established snowboard industry. (Troy Bush, cited in Howe, p. 85)

The snowboarding 'look' developed from a combination of elements derived from skateboarding, urban gangster and punk styles. Snowboard graphics designer Ken Block recalls that while "Gotcha and Billabong and Quicksilver had been making snowboard clothes for a long time...that stuff was like florescent ski gear for snowboarders...kids wanted to look like skaters, not skiers" (cited in Howe, 1998, p. 95). In addition, snowboarders exhibited stoicism and strength by wearing clothing that offered no protection from the snow and cold temperatures. Holly, a correspondent in an early study, noted that male riders adopted this style at the expense of comfort: "I see snowboarders up there who are wearing pants that sag down to their knees and flannels that are just covered in snow...they care more about the way they look than if they are freezing their butt off" (Anderson, 1999, p. 63). Wearing unconventional and oversized clothing unified snowboarders as an exclusive group and clearly distinguished them from skiers.

The clothing styles of the early snowboarder also contributed to marginalising female participation. Professional boarder Tina Basich remembers being unable to find snowboarding clothes in the early 1990s because all the boys' clothes were "super-huge" (cited in Howe, 1998, p. 121). Similarly, Anderson (1999) found that the popularity of "oversized clothing", "long hair", "baggies" and "flannels" in this period was an attempt to shore up snowboarding as a masculine domain (p. 63). Because most women avoided this style, male boarders could look like they were part of a select clique.

Snowboarders embodied the masculine images of the skateboarder, the gangster and the punk, and manipulated these into the stereotypical snowboarder style of the mid to late 1990s. By aligning themselves with the styles of underclass groups, the mostly white, middle-upper class snowboarder was attempting to make authentic the claim to being marginal, abnormal and poor and, most importantly, distinctly different from the upper class skier. Historically the middle classes have "differentiated themselves sharply" from the lower classes and have mimicked upper-class style (Jenkins, 2002, p. 139). Ironically contemporary snowboarders prefer to emulate lower classes styles (see Kusz, 2003). Not only did this image distinguish them from the predominantly upper class skiers, it also helped construct snowboarding as a naturally male endeavour.

Male snowboarders appropriated the fearless, aggressive and heterosexual representation of the urban gangster. The clothing, styles and tastes of gangsters, such as "dressing all street style, wearing T-shirts on their heads and headbands", baggy clothing, low riding pants with exposed boxer shorts, gold chains and the listening to rap and hip hop music, continue to heavily influence the snowboarding style (Yant, 2001, para. 30). In the early stages of the snowboarding culture this image may have intimidated many females. This no longer seems true. Many female riders wear baggy pants, bandanas and, notwithstanding the often extremely sexually degrading language, listen to the same hip hop music as their male counterparts. Many female snowboarders contribute to the reproduction of this image by mirroring their snowboarding 'brothers' and dressing, talking and behaving like gangsters.

The musical forms, philosophies and fashion trends of the male-dominated punk movement have long contributed to the snowboarding culture. Male boarders have emulated fashion trends from the punk era to create an identity

distinctly different from skiers. For example, Heikki Sorsa of Finland rode in the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympic Half pipe event sporting a Mohawk. Despite the fact that this punk style emerged from a male dominated sub-culture, male and female snowboarders now wear studded belts, safety pins, leather wristbands and body piercings as fashion accessories. The appropriation of clothing styles from the male dominated cultures of the gangster and punk no longer discourage female participation. However, they continue to promote the idea that males are better suited to the sport.

The irony is that the images of the gangster and punk originally were an attempt to preserve snowboarding as a masculine activity. Yet many female snowboarders are interpreting these images in different ways to men, thus creating hybrid identities based on the mixing and movement of cultures. For example, while many snowboarders imitate the urban gangster by wearing bandanas on their heads, some female snowboarders have adopted the creative practice of crocheting their headbands. Similarly, although the punk-inspired studded belt has become a standardised snowboarding accessory, a number of female snowboarders have reappropriated this style, wearing bright pink studded belts. Interestingly, some male snowboarders have recently adopted these styles and wear crocheted bandanas and pink studded belts. The resulting fusion or creolisation of the punk and gangster with snowboarding identities is not the assimilation of one culture or cultural tradition by another but the production of something new, a hybrid, and females have contributed to the construction of this new snowboarder identity.

The rapid commercialisation and popularisation of snowboarding during the 1990s fuelled many struggles within the culture. Divisions developed between insiders and newcomers and between different sub-groups. Core participants include those snowboarders, male and female, whose commitment to the sport is such that it organises their whole lives. For these participants snowboarding has become what Robert Stebbins (1992) terms 'serious leisure' and their lifestyle, behaviour and appearance reflect their status within the culture. Various identities exist within this core group. There are those who prefer big mountain riding which may involve dropping off rocks, riding down chutes and steep and deep snowboarding in powder and amongst trees; others prefer the half-pipe or jibbing and ride terrain parks on jumps and rails. The latter is currently the dominant form of snowboarding.<sup>10</sup> For the most part, male and female snowboarders are equally distributed throughout the different types of snowboarding (an exception includes the Big Air event which remains male dominated [Thorpe, 2003]).

In contrast to core boarders, less committed snowboarders including novices, poseurs or weekend warriors have lower cultural status.<sup>11</sup> A clear social hierarchy exists based on numerous qualities, some of which include geographical divisions, commitment, bodily disposition, style, clothing, equipment and ability. Cody Dresser, managing editor of *Transworld Snowboarding*, believes that snowboarding has "outgrown" all notions of a homogeneous culture (Dresser, 2002, p. 28). Similarly, as Andy Blumberg reminds us in the quote at the head of the article, a culture "once united" is "today divided" (2002, p. 16).<sup>12</sup> The clothing practices adopted by snowboarders contribute not only to the construction of identity and difference but also to this social hierarchy.

Initially the distinctive clothing styles of the gangster and punk clearly distinguished core snowboarders from skiers and the mainstream. Yet during the mid to late 1990s this alternative snowboarder look became fashionable. No longer did these clothing styles perform the function of producing and reproducing clear

social boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Thus, in an effort to regain authenticity, core snowboarders moved away from the traditional rebellions of piercing and tattooing and toward a more conservative and, ironically, mainstream stance, with less visual signification and more technically functional clothing (Howe, 1998).

Since the masses took to the slopes, snowboarding fashions have changed significantly. More than 20 companies – including Sessions, 686, Bonfire, NFA, Westbeach, Nikita, Burton, Volcom – provide snowboarding specific clothing. To meet snowboarders' multi-performance needs (or rather cash in on the increasingly significant snow dollar) manufacturers now offer a wide variety of clothing ranges. For example, Burton's 2004 catalogue offers men's, women's and youth's outerwear lines, totalling 266 items of clothing, including jackets, pants, beanies, sweatshirts, vests, thermal undergarments, casual pants and tops, and t-shirts, each in a range of colour options (Burton Rider Catalogue, 2004). Burton obviously recognises the importance of clothing to the identity of the snowboarder. Snowboard clothing carries status based on understanding the nuances of the culture. To the initiated member, decoding a combination of t-shirt graphics and other visual signifiers is an automatic process (Howe, 1998). For example, Volcom appeals to nonconformist youth while the older more conservative snowboarder might prefer the quality of Helly Hansen outerwear. The owners and managers of these companies work hard to maintain an authentic image.<sup>13</sup>

Companies that once entered the industry to cater for the predominantly male boarder are now broadening their product lines and tapping into the female market. Roxy Snow, Cold as Ice, Betty Rides, Monix and Nikita produce clothing primarily for women. This might be read as a sign that the industry is ready to not only include women but also to cater to their needs in both fashion and function.<sup>14</sup> However, *Transworld Snowboarding* journalist Tracey Fong calls the "stereotypical girlie" fashions of pastel pinks, baby blues, glam fabrics and fake fur being promoted by some (but not all) of these companies a "disturbing trend" (Fong, 2000, paras 3,1). An unintended consequence of such clothing is that it clearly separates the 'girls' from the 'men'. Thus male snowboarders are protected from the challenges posed by the female snowboarder, and they continue to appear as an exclusive group.

With the increasing number of participants, turnover rates in fashion trends have accelerated. According to Mike Featherstone "the constant supply of new, fashionably desirable goods" has produced a "paperchase effect in which those above will have to invest in new (informational) goods in order to re-establish the original social distance" (1991, p. 18). In this context, knowledge of the snowboarding culture becomes critical; cultural insiders need knowledge of new goods, their social and cultural value, and how to use them appropriately. Snowboarding magazines and videos then play key roles in communicating these new culturally and socially valuable styles and tastes. *Transworld Snowboarding* recently informed readers "goggle tans are no longer considered a status symbol in snowboarding" (Sherowski, 2003a, p. 58). But within the snowboarding media there is an ongoing tension between commercial appeal and rebelliousness (this ambivalence is also prevalent in the snowboarding industry and amongst professionals). They are divided between their interests in "winning a market by widening their audience, which inclines them to favour popularisation" and the "concern for cultural distinction, the only objective basis of their rarity" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 229; see also Wheaton & Beal, 2003).



Snowboarders turn over styles at an unprecedented rate (Urban trends, 2004-2005). This is not a new phenomenon as, historically, the middle classes have always maintained their “fascination with the latest trend, which they proceed to interpret, reinterpret, and reformulate” (Booth & Loy, 1999, p. 20). The fundamental reason, however, remains the same: distinction. Ironically, the homogeneity of the contemporary snowboarder’s visual appearance, especially among the young, core and elite, is conspicuous in any snowboard magazine or mountain resort. As *Transworld Snowboarding* notes, “everyone looks the same in snowboard clothing” (Coyle, 2002, p. 128). Indeed even young skiers are adopting the same clothing styles as the snowboarder.<sup>15</sup> As a result, many core members are reappropriating unconventional clothing to reinforce difference; tight jeans (inspired by the punk culture) were the fashion while writing this article (Urban trends, 2004-2005). But professional snowboarder JP Solberg questions this trend, asking “why anybody would go snowboarding in jeans so tight they don’t even come over your boots” (What sucks, 2004, p. 48). Once again snowboarding style is becoming “more individualised” and with boarders demanding apparel that says, “hey, I’m a snowboarder” (Urban trends, 2004-2005, para. 1), designers are getting creative. For example, Burton has recently produced the Night Op Jacket which has a headlamp-like lighting system on the hood (Urban trends, 2004-2005). Not all participants welcome the effects of these trends. Professional snowboarder Bjorn Leines complains: “Now the vibe is like being in high school — what gear are you runnin’? Which clique do you hang with? That’s not what it’s supposed to be about” (Words to, 2004, p. 24). As Turner reminds us at the start of the article, “social status involves practices which emphasize and exhibit cultural distinctions and differences which are a crucial feature of all social stratification” (1988, p. 66). Clothing is one such practice that has always been a crucial feature of social stratification in snowboarding culture.

### Lingo

Snowboarders not only mark their group identity with the embodiment of visible symbols (such as clothing), they also embody less visible aspects of style such as language. Snowboarding lingo is distinctive and identifiable from both mainstream and other sports cultures, especially skiing. Snowboarders have their own argot to describe the snowboarding experience as well as equipment and techniques. *Transworld Snowboarding’s* website defines hundreds of these terms in their ‘lexicon of snowboarding language’. Some common terms include: Fakie – A term for riding backwards; Hucker – One who throws himself/herself wildly through the air and does not land on his/her feet; Beat – A term used to describe something that is not good (Australian Snowboarder, 1, 2003, p. 50; see also Lackett, 2002).

Snowboarders have also incorporated the lexicon and slang from the gangster culture. The snowboarding media blatantly appropriate this gangster lingo, writing texts in the colloquial language and terminology that only gangsters and core snowboarders understand. For example, *Transworld Snowboarding* writes to “all you fresh-ass mofos out there” (Letters 13.4, 1999, para. 1). Much of the jargon in the culture uses violent metaphors such “killing”, “slashing”, “tearing” and “destroying” to encapsulate high performance.

The extensive technical vocabulary, as well as violent and gangster language and slang, distinguishes the insiders from the outsiders. However, popularisation

of snowboarding has brought about a more widespread use of the basic lingo. One correspondent to *Snowboarder Magazine* expresses his irritation:

It just pisses me off when I come to school and hear “fags anonymous” talk about how “the boss” was “doing awesome stuff in the pipe”. Before that [Olympics, corporate sponsorships] they had probably never even seen snowboarding before and if I ask them now, I guarantee that they would have no idea who the hell Danny Kass or Ross Powers were. “Huh? What’s a Kasserroll?” (Sold out, 2003, p. 44)

The use of snowboarding lingo as an existing symbolic marker by outsider groups contributes to Mike Featherstone’s (1991) “paperchase effect” (p. 18) and snowboarding language is becoming increasingly technical and obscure. While cultural identity can be imitated, only those with high cultural knowledge recognise the difference between a ‘switch ally-oop mc-twist’ and a ‘corked backside five’. The widespread use of a distinct lexicon amongst the snowboarding culture contributes to the production and reproduction of snowboarders as a social group. However, the increasing complexity of the lingo also helps support the snowboarding hierarchy.

### **Bodily Deportment**

Snowboarders exhibit a distinctive bodily style in their social interaction. Many snowboarders adopt an ‘I’m cooler than you’ attitude. This is most obvious in snowboarding magazines where advertisements and editorial features regularly show professionals standing staunch and gazing directly into the camera, as indicated in Figure 1. Traditionally this staunch bodily style has been limited to male snowboarders. However, exceptions, including women “staring back at the viewer in a gender-neutral manner”, are increasing (although Figure 1 is not such an example). The snowboarders featured in these advertisements are the most respected and their knowledge of this status embodies further confidence, ease and a sort of indifference to the objectifying gaze of the reader/camera. According to Bourdieu, “the self-assurance given by the certain knowledge of one’s own value, especially that of one’s body or speech, is in fact very closely linked to the position occupied in social space” (1984, p. 206). In contrast to the professional’s confident deportment, the novice snowboarder is often conspicuously timid, uneasy in his or her body and language. The self-assured and indifferent attitude of the professional snowboarder is progressively internalised as former novices mature. As the quote at the head of this article explains, “cool” snowboarders refuse to acknowledge ‘others’ (Blumberg, 2002, p. 16). By acting indifferent and superior, boarders attempt to convey not only that they are different from skiers and all ‘outsiders’ but that they can ‘do it better’ than others on the mountain. *Transworld Snowboarding* describes the professional snowboarders’ attitude as “disrespectful, belligerent, and ‘who gives a f–k’” (How do, 2003, p. 16).



**Figure 1.** NFA advertisement (*Transworld Snowboarding*, April, 2004). This advertisement illustrates the contemporary snowboarder 'look'. Patrick (centre) clearly demonstrates the embodiment of confidence, ease and a sort of indifference to the objectifying gaze of the reader. This 'look' is particularly true of the male snowboarders. In comparison, on the left, Kendra's body position, facial expression and look away from the camera is quite different. This advertisement is not typical of the depiction of 'all' female boarders in the media. The representation of the female snowboarder is becoming increasingly varied; this is an interesting phenomenon that needs further analysis. Image used with permission of NFA.

In this section I have explored some of the ways snowboarders embody and display their subcultural affiliation through the choice of symbolic goods and their subsequent customising. Clothing, language and bodily deportment provide the “small number of distinctive features which, functioning as a system of difference...allows the most fundamental differences to be expressed ...and offers well-nigh inexhaustible possibilities for the pursuit of distinction” (Bourdieu, cited in Kew, 1986, p. 311). The snowboarding field has increasingly become a structured system of social positions, and the embodiment of distinctive snowboarding tastes and styles helps reinforce the position of “established” groups and the marginal status of “outsider” groups. In the following section I argue that less visible characteristics, such as displays of commitment, physical prowess and risk-taking are also highly valued in the snowboarding culture and are particularly important for gaining cultural status. The embodiment of these values is another essential part of ‘becoming a snowboarder’.

### **SNOWBOARDING STATUS: COMMITMENT, PHYSICAL PROWESS AND RISK-TAKING**

A central theme of Bourdieu’s work is his interest in struggles and competition over status, a “sense of honour” and “cultural distinction”. Bourdieu explains:

In my earliest analyses of honour...you will find all the problems that I am still tackling today: the idea that struggles for recognition are a fundamental dimension of social life and that what is at stake in them is an accumulation of a particular form of capital, honour in the sense of reputation and prestige, and that there is, therefore, a specific logic behind the accumulation of symbolic capital... (1990, p. 22)

Social status in the snowboarding culture is gained from the accumulation of symbolic capital, which is a “unique source of motivation – a resource, a reward” (Booth & Loy, 1999, p. 4). Although taste and style play an important part in constructing a distinctive snowboarding identity, members cannot ‘buy’ their way into the core of the culture. As *New Zealand Snowboarder* puts it, respect has “got to be earned, usually with a lot of blood, sweat and tears” (Onset: respect, 1995, p. 9). In Bourdieu’s (1984) terms, the relationship between economic capital and (sub) cultural capital is more complex than a direct exchange. In snowboarding, the only usable and effective capital –symbolic capital – is “prestige” or “authority” and the “only legitimate accumulation consists of making a name for oneself, a known, recognised name” (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 262). For the core participants themselves, rather than novices, poseurs and outsiders, less visible characteristics are more important to the process of cultural identity formation (for similar observations in the windsurfing culture, see Wheaton, 2000). The following section briefly examines the snowboarders’ value system to illustrate some of the different ways in which core participants create, signify and embody symbolic capital.

### **Physical Prowess, Risk-taking and Injuries**

Snowboarders earn prestige from their peers through displays of physical prowess which includes finely-honed combinations of skill, muscular strength, aggression, toughness and, above all, courage (Morford and Clarke, 1976). *Transworld*

*Snowboarding's* introduction to professional boarder Roman De Marchi illustrates the value of physical prowess, courage and risk taking in gaining cultural status:

How many people do you know who live life like there's no tomorrow? He'll look at something and say, "I'm gonna do that. Get out your camera". And everyone else will be like, "are you f--king nuts? Shit that doesn't look doable", he'll stomp it nine out of ten times...his riding is going bigger, harder, and gnarlier than everybody else's. (Muzzey, 2003, p. 126)

Within the snowboarding culture, danger is the object of a strong unconscious attraction (Bataille, 1985). For example, a recent trend among "passionate snowboarders" is to hike into the backcountry, provoke an avalanche and then ride it; the snowboarder who can "surf" the avalanche the longest is the "winner" but the snowboarder drowned by the snow-slide is inexorably the loser (On the, 2004, para. 2). Philosopher Georges Bataille links glory and honour to notions of loss (1985, p. 122). The key issue here is that prestige and power is not gained by how much snowboarders can accumulate (e.g., clothing) but by how much they are capable of losing (e.g., life, career, injury, equipment).

Sport fosters a culture of risk that encourages male (and ever increasingly, female) athletes to ignore or deny injuries and pain, and where admitting to injury or suffering is tantamount to admitting weakness (Nixon, 1993). Tolerance of physical risk carries enormous symbolic capital in the "evaluation of masculinity" (Young, White & McTeer, 1994, p. 177). In this context snowboarders frame serious injury as a masculinising experience. Engaging in risk and injury proves dedication and toughness, and athletes who perform while injured gain "kudos within peer groups" (Young et al., p. 176). This philosophy has become internalised by snowboarders and spectators alike.

The glorification of injuries is an emerging trend in the snowboarding culture. Interviews in magazines usually include 'worst injury' questions with replies reported in detail. Likewise, most snowboard films have a 'slam-section' featuring crashes and injuries. Snowboard magazines regularly include photos of riders proudly displaying their gashes, black eyes, bruises, stitches, swelling and broken bones. These photos reinforce snowboarding as an activity requiring courage. The snowboarding media insists on revealing the gory details, prompting riders for the particulars of their injuries: "So did they rip it straight out of you?" "They just stuck it back on?" "It took off the cartilage?" "You cut off your tongue as well?" "Did you pass out?" (Coyle, 2002, p. 134). Such accounts construct riders as heroes, for risking physical injury and tolerating pain. The top female riders also embody the cultural values of courage. Professional snowboarder Tara Dakides explains: "I've fractured my back, dislocated elbows, and torn ligaments in both knees. I've gotten whiplash six or seven times this year and who knows how many concussions. This sport is all or nothing" (Ulmer & Straus, 2002, para. 3). However, despite its extensive coverage of male risk taking, injury and pain, the media directs very little attention to female riders' injuries (see Thorpe, 2005, forthcoming). By lionizing the physical injuries experienced by male riders the snowboarding media strengthens the image of the dedicated core male boarder as one who takes more risks and, by default, is tougher and more courageous than most females and all poseurs.

Contrary to Bourdieu's (1984) suggestion that the common feature of such new bourgeois sports is that they are mainly pursued for their health maintaining

functions, most people snowboard primarily for immediate gratification.<sup>16</sup> Core snowboarders are not concerned with their health, longevity and self-preservation but denote a relationship between the body and self that emphasises intense, short-term experiences and the self-actualised “inner” or “felt” (not displayed) body (see Featherstone, 1983). For example, professional snowboarder Scotty Wittlake sarcastically describes his relationship to his body:

My body's a temple, so only the finest fast foods enter it. And with a mug like this, you need beauty sleep, so I try to get at least six hours a week. When it comes to exercise...I try to do as many 40-ounce curls as I can (How do, 2003, p. 16).

As Midol and Broyer (1995) observe, “whiz sports” such as snowboarding are “playful practices” grounded in the “here and now” (p. 207). Top snowboarder Annie Boulanger admits to a short-range view on participation, explaining that she plans to continue snowboarding “until Advil in the morning doesn't do it anymore” (cited in Sherowski, 2003b, p. 155). This is similar to the working classes' adoption of an “instrumental relation to the body” which they express in a variety of social practices (Bourdieu, 1978, p. 838). It might be argued that the predominantly middle-class snowboarder adopts a lower-class, live for the day, relation toward the body in an attempt to constitute an authentic claim to a marginal identity (see Kusz, 2003). By embodying practices typical of the lower classes (e.g., an instrumental relation to the body, urban gangster styles) the ‘felt’ and the ‘displayed’ snowboarding bodies are inextricably linked in their pursuit of distinction.

Snowboarders gain cultural status through exhibiting commitment, physical prowess and risk-taking and under certain conditions this symbolic capital is converted into economic capital. With bigger than life personalities, professional snowboarders such as Tara Dakides, Mark Frank Montoya and JP Walker have been labelled cultural “superstars” by both the mainstream and snowboarding specific media (Is snowboarding, 2002, para. 3). Bourdieu notes that to “‘make one's name’ means making one's mark, achieving recognition (in both senses) of one's difference from others...” (1980, p. 289). These riders make their names through a combination of physical prowess and distinctive and marketable identities. For example, combined with her courageous and powerful riding style, Tara Dakides' “rad SoCal style, gnarly fashion sense, lovely looks, and sense of humour make her one of snowboarding's most prominent divas” writes *EXPN.com* (Athlete Bios, 2002, para. 1). Having developed a known, recognised name in the snowboarding culture, some professionals gain a “capital of consecration implying a power to consecrate objects (with a trademark or signature) and therefore give value to, and to appropriate the profits from this operation” (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 262). With her sporting success, Dakides has gained major corporate sponsors including Mountain Dew and Campbell's Soup at Hand and a range of product sponsors including Jeenyus Snowboards, Dragon Goggles, Vans Outerwear, Pro Tec helmets and GMC snow gloves, all of whom use her signature on their designs to profit from her cultural status. Similar to countless examples of professional athletes from traditional sports, Tara Dakides has become what sociologist Michael Messner (2002) terms a “walking corporate billboard” (p. 148). For some top snowboarders the accumulation of symbolic capital merges with the accumulation of economic capital. However, only those who can embrace the prerequisites of

professional snowboarding “can reap the full economic profits of their symbolic capital” (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 263).

Snowboarding might be a financially lucrative for a select few but the culture continues to privilege symbolic over economic capital. The words of German sociologist Axel Honneth (1986) are enlightening here:

That which constitutes the social value of a particular form of cultural behaviour has no stable, interpretation-free equivalent, as does money. That is why judgements of taste and lifestyle habits, which may be considered as embodiments of cultural knowledge, have a certain social validity only if the aura of social superiority can be lent to them in a socially binding way (p. 61).

While core snowboarders can still clearly demarcate themselves from the popular taste culture of outsiders and marginal participants/poseurs, they can only improve their own status by means of cultural practices that prove the stylistic exclusiveness of these practices to their peers (Honneth, 1986). Only one's peers confer prestige and honour in the snowboarding culture (Midol, 1993). Snowboarders compete against themselves via the symbolic practices of commitment, physical prowess and risk-taking for, as Bourdieu claims, marks of distinction (1984). Snowboarders only earn symbolic capital by going “bigger and fatter than everybody” (male snowboarder, cited in Anderson, 1999, p. 55), practices exclusive to only the most committed.

### **Snowboarding Bodies**

According to Willis, James, Canaan and Hurd (1993) “most young people's lives are...full of expressions, signs and symbols through which individuals and groups seek creatively to establish their presence, identity and meaning” (cited in Kidd, 2002, p. 124). Ultimately, this article illustrates the significance of the body as a symbol of status and for the construction of snowboarding identities. I have examined how snowboarders distinguish themselves from non-snowboarders, marginal participants and each other by means of embodying visual signifiers such as clothing, language and bodily deportment, and less visual practices such as physical prowess, commitment and risk-taking. But the larger issue is how these embodied practices contribute to the construction and reconstruction of social groups and cultural hierarchies via the unequal distribution of power or capital.

The popularisation of snowboarding diminished snowboarding's distinctive value. Core snowboarders reacted to these challenges and embodied creative practices as a means to symbolically police the boundaries between inclusion and exclusion. The structure of the snowboarding field is defined by the distribution of physical and symbolic capital but this capital is not distributed evenly. Within the snowboarding field, symbolic struggles over the power to produce and impose the legitimate dispositions are performed incessantly. Yet agents yield power to construct meanings proportionate to their symbolic and cultural capital, and it is the core and professional participants, and the snowboarding companies and media, that hold the power to legitimise embodied dispositions. Thus, the snowboarding field, a symbolic system constructed through the embodiment of shared tenets, values and beliefs, has become a field of forces, a set of objective power relations that impose themselves on all who enter the culture. Distinctions, expressed as the embodiment of tastes and styles, contribute not only to the

construction of identity and difference but also to the existing social order by clearly distinguishing the insiders from the outsiders. For example, although the snowboarding culture has become increasingly divided, the bonds between core snowboarders remain strong. Professional snowboarder Romain De Marchi explains:

More random people are becoming snowboarders...it's kind of a fashionable thing to do for these new people – not the same way it used to be. You know – fun, friends, and boards. But all the *real* snowboarders, they still have the passion and *know* the soul of snowboarding. (cited in Muzzey, 2003, p. 136, emphasis added)

This article refutes claims of the “end of status” (Turner, 1988, p. 76) and the “irrelevance of social divisions” (Featherstone, 1987, p. 56) in contemporary society and illustrates, via a case study of the snowboarding body, that group identity does not completely disintegrate but is instead “subject to new determinations and new forces” (Kellner, 1992, p. 174). Shilling argues “the body is centrally implicated in questions of self-identity, the construction and maintenance of social inequalities, and the constitution and development of societies” (1993, p. 204). Similarly, David Lowe explains that “this body referent is in fact the referent of all referents, in the sense that ultimately all signifieds, values or meanings refer to the delineation and satisfaction of the needs of the body” (cited in Harvey, 2001, p. 2). The body now plays a central role in producing and reproducing social groups and establishing cultural hierarchies, and the “embodied boarder” is an important case study for gaining insight into how contemporary youth both construct and understand their worlds.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was runner-up in the 2004 North American Society for the Sociology of Sport Barbara Brown Student Paper award.

<sup>2</sup> Having spent eight consecutive winters snowboarding in New Zealand and North America, I am a cultural insider but to increase the likelihood that the 'embodied boarder' was being understood from various points of view and ways of knowing, I utilized multiple methods of data collection. Snowboard magazines and websites have been an important source for this study, encompassing as they do dominant ideas, statements and knowledge at specific junctures in snowboard culture. Previous cultural experience enabled me to complete a participant observation phase focused on a snowboarding community centred in Queenstown, New Zealand, over three months during the 2003 winter season. Observations were made in natural settings both on and off the snow, including lift lines, chair lifts, resort lodges, snowboard competitions, prize givings, bars, cafes, local hangouts and snowboard shops. The main aim of the participant observation phase was to refine and develop the analytical themes that had emerged in the study of documentary and visual sources, as well as potentially produce new areas of inquiry.

<sup>3</sup> Jewellery, make-up and wigs were an integral part of ancient Egyptian culture, worn for both decorative and symbolic purposes. Men, women and children, kings, queens and common people alike wore jewellery. The wealthy adorned themselves with magnificent bracelets, pendants, necklaces, rings, armlets, earrings, diadems, head ornaments, pectoral ornaments and collars of gold (Thomas, no date).

<sup>4</sup> The Moko, Mataora and even the Mata-kioré facials of Maori contain ancestral/tribal messages pertaining to the wearer. These messages narrate a wearer's family, sub-tribal and tribal affiliations and their placing within these social structures (Kopua, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu identifies numerous forms of capital including economic (e.g., wealth), cultural (e.g., artistic taste), and social (e.g., social connections). He also identifies linguistic (e.g., vocabulary and pronunciation), academic (e.g., tertiary qualifications), and bodily (e.g., physical attractiveness).

<sup>6</sup> Objectified state (for example, pictures and books which are the traces or realisation of theories and bodies of knowledge). Institutionalised state (for example, as academic qualifications conferred on those who reach a certain level of education). Embodied state (in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the body and mind). See Shilling (1993, p. 149) for further information on these forms of cultural capital.

<sup>7</sup> The "new cultural intermediaries" can be found in market-oriented consumer cultural occupations – the media, advertising, design, fashion, etc. They are the new "tastemakers" constantly on the look out for new cultural goods and experience (see Featherstone, 1991, p. 35).

<sup>8</sup> The American Sports Data reports the average mean household income of snowboarders is more than US\$56,000 (The changing marketplace, no date), which is higher than the median income of US\$42,228 (DeNavas-Walt & Cleveland, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> During the 2004 winter season lift passes cost between NZ \$40-70 per day; season passes can cost between NZ \$300-\$1000. The 2003 *New Zealand Snowboarder* buyers' guide shows snowboards ranging between NZ \$400 and \$1200, boots between NZ \$160 and \$780, bindings between NZ \$160 and \$640. The buyers' guide also shows snowboarding jackets prices ranging between NZ \$299-\$599, pants between NZ \$259-\$499, goggles between NZ \$79.95-\$294.95 and gloves between NZ \$99.95-\$175. Average weekly earning for NZ males aged 15-19 years are NZ\$251 and 20-24 years are NZ\$499 (*Statistics New Zealand*).

<sup>10</sup> Jibbing: A playful sub-style of freestyle snowboarding that uses all kinds of obstacles such as trees, stumps, rails, etc. Jibbing can also be synonymous with 'goofing around' on a snowboard, doing small technical tricks in a playful manner. More recently 'jibbing' has come to symbolize the adoption of the 'new school style' of aggressive snowboarding on rails and jumps. Boarders are continually creating new manoeuvres on these obstacles.

<sup>11</sup> Rather than demonstrating commitment via participation, poseurs display a "prefabricated version" of a snowboarder by consciously displaying name-brand clothing and equipment. Becky Beal found similar identities in the skateboarding culture, where core skateboarders labelled these participants as "rats" (Beal and Weidman, 2003, p. 340).

<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that the snowboarding hierarchy is not divided by gender, and core female boarders share many of the same values and identities with core males (Thorpe, 2005, forthcoming). The most highly ranked participants are the professionals and then amateurs; both categories include male and female snowboarders. Sponsorship involves an exchange of goods and services, in which the manufacturer or retailer supplies a select group of snowboarders with free equipment, clothing, stickers, etc. Sponsored snowboarders are required to represent their companies although whether this is in competitions, films or magazines is not standardized. While both professional and amateur snowboarders are sponsored, only professionals are paid.

<sup>13</sup> Becky Beal and Lisa Weidman (2003) identify a number of strategies used in the skateboarding industry to gain authenticity. These include: self-selection, sponsorship of professional and amateur skateboarders and appealing to skateboarders' values. The snowboarding industry adopts similar strategies. Brands such as Burton or Volcom have more cultural status than others such as Rip Curl or Helly Hansen.

<sup>14</sup> Some of these companies, such as Nikita, are owned and organized by women. Others are extensions of larger, male-dominated corporations such as Roxy Snow (Quicksilver).

<sup>15</sup> A Sims Snowboards advertisement on the back of the September 2002 issue of *Transworld Snowboarding* sees the humour in this trend. The advertisement shows a skier and snowboarder wearing similar clothing. A pop quiz asks readers "how are these kids alike?" The reader must then "check all that apply": "they both dress like snowboarders", "one rides the 'pipe' and the other rides the 'pole'", "corporate America considers them both 'EXTREME'" or "their snowboards and skis were made by the same company".

<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that for a few participants identification is the primary concern especially the "poseurs" (e.g., "I am a snowboarder").

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